

# Interdisciplinary Conceptualizations of Flow in Performance Studies

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Flow is typically described as a psychological state where one becomes enmeshed with the performance of a task (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). While Csikszentmihalyi's work was centred in positive psychology, studies of flow have crossed into sport psychology, dance studies, sociocultural kinesiology, sociology, as well as theatre and performance studies. As an athlete, dancer, and actor, my interest in flow focuses on the articulation of the experience. Hence, in this study, I interviewed ten professionals across various performance disciplines to investigate the similarities and differences of how they conceptualized flow. In my analysis, I engaged in reflective interpretation with the data such that I was able to understand participants' discussion of flow through my lived performance experiences to identify three overarching themes: articulations of flow experiences, flow as context-dependent, and flow as emerging 'in-the-moment'. My findings highlight moments of divergence and convergence across their flow experiences.

**Keywords:** flow, positive psychology, performance

There is nothing quite like the feeling of being completely immersed in physical performance. My interest in this state stems from my experiences as a musician, dancer, actor, and athlete in both individual and team sports, and the joy and focus these experiences engendered. In conversations with fellow athlete-artists, I recognize that those who possess a high level of skill across different fields of physical performance share similar experiences. While dance, theatre, and sport are often seen as categorically distinct, I, as Walsh (2021) suggested, think that this distinction between artistic and sporting performances should be challenged. Therefore, in this study, my purpose is to 'trouble' this distinction between sport and art through a single point of convergence: the phenomenon of flow.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Flow is conceptualized as a state of optimal functioning that is connected to psychological constructs of presence, focus, pleasure, immersion, and joy (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi,

1999). Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) clarified that is “a state of consciousness where one becomes totally absorbed in what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and emotions” (p. 5). Flow functions both as a means to achieve a particular desired outcome and as a means to work towards an intangible ‘ideal’ performance to create a unified or harmonious experience of effortless coordination between mind and body. Studies of flow are often tied to positive psychology, a branch of psychology where the intent is to investigate how sources for focus, creativity, play, and joy ultimately contribute to individuals leading richer lives in the context of human behaviour and cognition (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). To optimize positive behaviour, Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) offered a list of nine dimensions that are necessary for an individual to enter into a flow state: a perceived challenge-skills balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time, and an autotelic experience where the activity itself is intrinsically rewarding (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Arguably, the most important prerequisite to enter a state of flow is the notion of the challenge-skills balance, which encapsulates a relationship between the level or difficulty of a task and its perceived difficulty (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). As such, the balance between challenge and ability cannot be predetermined in a given situation as there is always a risk or unpredictability in the execution of skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). For example, a lack of challenge can result in apathy or boredom and, hence, limit motivation and effort (Luiselli & Reed, 2011).

Because flow is understood as an effortless connection between mind and body, it can be easily disrupted by emotions (e.g., states of heightened happiness or self-awareness), extreme concentration (e.g., fatigue), illness, and a reflection on the act of awareness (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The merging of action and awareness, therefore, requires total absorption in what one is doing. While this means that flow is difficult to maintain for any length of time, having a sense of control over one’s actions, through the establishment of clear goals and objectives, is vital for flow performance and continued effort.

A sense of accomplishment is inextricably connected to a person’s identity and their support network, particularly in dynamic sporting or dance environments (Gallucci, 2013). Being part of a group, with an established level of familiarity and trust, is beneficial to being in a state of flow (Łuczniak et al., 2021). Because the emphasis in positive psychology is on optimizing behavioural and performance outcomes, clear and continuous feedback with respect to the set goals, is an essential element in achieving flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Feedback, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, requires a performer to concentrate on and attend fully to their performance (Luiselli & Reed, 2011). Performing well and achieving a particular task goal is connected to confidence where an athlete who recently performed well is more

likely to believe they will perform well in an upcoming task or practice. Hence, the setting of clear goals, personal support, provision of feedback, concentration, and confidence, in turn, reciprocally influence the challenge-skills balance. Ultimately, the conscious component of awareness dissolves when one is in a complete state of flow (Gallucci, 2013). This loss of self-consciousness, paired with high intrinsic motivation (to achieve a goal) makes an activity inherently rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Because a flow state is in a constant state of change, both sport and creative activities, such as dance and art, have “theoretically unreachable ceilings” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 149).

In short, tenets of positive and behavioural psychology, such as attention, focus, pleasure (joy), and task-orientation typically frame the definition of flow, and it is these understandings of flow that dominate research. Because flow is tied to the optimization of performance and behavioural outcomes, studies frequently examine flow through specific research sub-disciplines, such as behavioural or performance psychology, or sport studies (Alameda et al., 2022; Luiselli & Reed, 2011). While some research on flow is also common across different performance contexts such as sport, games, structured leisure, and educational and artistic pursuits, experiences of flow are often compartmentalized within a specific context (Carter et al., 2013). As a musician, dancer, actor, and athlete, my interest lies in bringing together multiple performance disciplines to address the following question: how is flow articulated, experienced, and understood in various performance disciplines?

## **METHODS**

In this study, I conducted qualitative interviews to understand the phenomenon of flow in different performance contexts (soccer, curling, rugby, contemporary dance, theatre, performance consulting, and psychology).

### **Participants**

I purposefully identified and contacted ten participants (fellow students or instructors) with whom I had an existing working relationship (Table 1). After explaining the purpose and process of this study, I obtained informed consent as per the University of Alberta’s Research Ethics Board guidelines and their agreement to use their real names. All ten had extensive experience in their respective fields of performance. The variety in expertise allowed me to examine how flow can be articulated across disciplines.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The interviews were conducted either in-person or virtually over Zoom or Google Meets software. Each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview format which sought to examine each professional's lived experience in a particular discipline in relation to how they valued or conceptualized flow and flow states.

*Table 1. Participants*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Role</i>
Ricardo	Soccer	Player, coach, coach educator
Mattia	Soccer	Player, coach
Gabe	Curling	Player, coach
Alissa	Rugby	Former player, Associate Professor in Sociology
Emily	Contemporary Dance	Dancer, teacher, sessional instructor in tertiary institution
Jennifer	Contemporary Dance	Dancer, Professor in Dance
Kathleen	Theatre	Director, educator
Marek	Consultant	Flow performance, career coach
Kate	Clinical Psychologist	Assistant Coach Team Canada Paralympic Volleyball
Geri	Skier, cross-country runner	Health Psychologist, Assistant Professor in Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation

### **Researcher's Positionality and Analytical Process**

My engagement in the study was influenced by Dumitriu's (2014) and Profeta's (2015) interpretation of Goffman's dramaturgical analysis in sport and dance respectively. To investigate how participants from multiple disciplines understood flow, I first recognized that there was a point of mediation between a participant's subjective experiences of flow, their ability to articulate this, and my own interpretation. As someone who trained in both athletic and artistic disciplines, I engaged in reflective interpretation with the data such that I was able to understand participants' discussion of flow through my lived performance experiences as a dancer, actor, and rugby player. Through this process of reading and reflection, I identified patterns across participants' descriptions of flow experiences. I then inductively grouped (Bogart, 2012) and expanded upon these conceptualizations of flow, its utility, and its value. This process of analysis allowed me to capture commonalities and differences across disciplines rather than disciplinary-specific interpretations. In my analysis, I found myself both relating to and misunderstanding the performer, practitioner, and athlete experiences depending on the degree to which my personal experience resonated with that of the participant. Thus, the themes that emerged weave together my and my participants' experiences. In the following section, I identify and describe my overarching understandings of participants' lived experiences of flow.

### **A CONVERSATION AMONG DISCIPLINES**

As Bignall (2008) noted, the way an individual conceptualized flow in performance was not only a product of their subjective experience, but an accumulation of the values and assumptions embedded within the context of the discipline in which they performed or competed. Similarly, I noted how the participants' multiple viewpoints intersected across disciplines to illustrate how flow was qualified and influenced by rigorous training and lived experience in that discipline.

Some participants articulated an idea of flow that was shared through their personal experience and informed by their background training. Others provided analogies that depicted the aesthetic quality of flow, or performance environments that facilitated the flow experience based on anecdotal and embodied understandings. Accordingly, I organized their experiences in three themes: articulations of flow experiences, flow as context-dependent, and flow as emergent.

### **Articulations of Flow Experiences**

For all participants, flow was something that was universally understood but difficult to articulate. Flow was expressed from the perspective of a performer and as a witness.

### *As a Performer*

As sport performers, participants frequently articulated flow through psychological terms: attention, focus, semi-conscious, and automatic. Yet, for each participant, these had a different degree of resonance. For example, Ricardo, a soccer player and coach, associated flow with being in the moment: “there’s no processing time, ball is exactly where you want it to go”. It was an attentive or semi-conscious state, “but not thought” (Kate, a clinical psychologist and coach). For Gabe (a curler), flow was “tough to think about. I think the common flow that everyone talks about is like the runner's high and just being in that state and continuing on”. Additionally, flow was described as an almost ‘magical’ quality where:

You have that ability to see there’s probably like a one-inch gap here where I can just squeeze the ball through...And it's gonna skip once, land on my teammate's foot. He's gonna drop it back. And then it's gonna be a shot on net. And the ball just bounces exactly where you hope and expect it does.  
(Ricardo)

This magical quality was further exemplified by Alissa’s (a former rugby player) description of flow as a gaining of momentum and energy. She noted, “it's a big part of team sports and every athlete will say it's there, but you can't touch it. You can't measure it. And I think, you know, athletes have a very strong sense of [it]”. Flow, as a behavioural momentum, was something that could be lost and regained (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) through enactment of strategic decisions by multiple bodies. In short, these descriptions implied flow as a sense of being immersed in the moment, not an act of cognition, that was a desirable state.

Team sport players and coaches – Ricardo, Mattia and Alissa – also saw flow as something transferable, from one context to another and as something to be imitated. Alissa found the idea of flow as an immersive state to be helpful in teaching at tertiary levels: “I think a lot of those skills specifically as a nine [the scrum half position in rugby] were really helpful for academia...Like, it's just, there's something very nice about that and I don't wanna contaminat[e] it with analyzing it all the time”. Being in a state of flow was a feeling that could be transferred and reproduced in other contexts. Mattia, also a soccer player and coach, distinguished a good player from a great player:

By how they understand the game, how they can see the game, and how they can interact between each other because that's the real difference between an amateur, good player, and a very good player because you can have a player who is very skillful but he can't understand the game.

By trying to mimic the 'best' soccer players, flow became an ideal performance outcome that could be achieved. Gruenler (2023) articulated this process of emulating top players and teams as mimetic desire, "[w]e want to 'become like them', to spirit away their very being" (Gruenler, 2023, p. 9). In essence, flow as a style of play became idealized, and movements that exemplified flow were legitimized and valued; good players should and did aspire to achieve this ideal.

However, this understanding of flow as desirable or attainable was not consistent across all disciplines. For example, in curling, entering into a flow state was a challenge because of the intermittent "way that it's structured, you get very few moments where you can actually get into that state. I'll say that when you're actually throwing a rock the less thinking you can do, the better you're gonna do" (Gabe). Gabe's reflections highlighted that flow in the sport of curling was different than other team contexts, where the only moment of true focus was the point when an individual player threw the rock. Standing and waiting to throw made becoming totally absorbed in that task of throwing the rock challenging and easily disrupted the challenge-skills balance (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). As such, flow was more applicable in training where players spent more time practising their throws than in competition.

Contrary to psychological understandings of flow in sport, Geri, a health psychologist herself, questioned the psychological basis of flow and instead interpreted it as a "kind of non-rational, non-cognitive, kind of more automatic processes" where "physiological sensations influence psychobiological processes (behaviour)". Kathleen (theatre director) also articulated flow as a "process that is deeply rooted in physicality" and is grown, repeated, and explored to a point where the physicality has permeated the world of the actors' performance so that the play is deeply enriched with this embodied process". Instead of a loss of self-consciousness (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), both Geri and Kathleen saw flow as rooted in the physicality of movement. As such, flow was not only experienced by the performer, but was also 'witnessed' from an outsider point of view.

### *As a Witness*

In this study, some participants made sense of flow through their expertise as performers and educators: their experience allowed them to discern whether or not the performers were in a state of flow.

Flow was often described as a subjective and aesthetic experience from the perspective of an audience member or teacher/coach. Both Ricardo (soccer) and Emily (contemporary dancer) described flow as “beautiful”, “awe-inspiring”, and “stunning” from an audience perspective. A witness, like a performer, felt immersed in the sporting performance through a heightened degree of focus and attention. In this sense, the athlete or performer became a vessel for the witness’s experience of flow, a subjective experience that is constantly in-flux and in motion (Alameda et al., 2022).

Others articulated flow as a hypothetical state where its presence or absence illustrated the extent to which players “understand the game, how they can see the game, and how they can interact between each other because that’s the real difference between an amateur, good player, and a very good player” (Mattia). A very good player was, thus, better able to represent this ideal way of moving or playing. Ricardo added that, “I feel like that’s the way the game should be played. In a sense, like everyone’s like, ‘oh yes, this is what we’re all shooting for’”. Therefore, flow as an ideal, subjective and aesthetic state was desirable across different forms of performance.

However, as an ideal state, flow was challenging to teach or integrate into practice. For example, Kathleen highlighted how she tried to embed flow through a process of ‘emblem’ work in her rehearsals that “allows actors to be completely concentrated and immersed in their performance”. Kathleen’s physical approach to acting often engendered “a lot of suspicion” from actors unfamiliar with the physicality of emblem work. They tended “to be very protective [and] have their ‘own way of working’ [and] don’t want to be challenged” by a director who integrates “physicality at every step”. This experience exemplifies Csikszentmihalyi’s dimension of challenge-skills balance where actors were reluctant to engage in an activity they felt was too challenging, which in turn limited their ability to enter into flow. This experience, in particular, resonated with my own difficulty of developing richness in creative work to enhance performance.

Interestingly, Jennifer, a contemporary dancer and professor in dance, expressed how witnessing flow informed her own contemporary dance practice. As an expert in screen dance, Jennifer explored a process of methodological improvisation between dance and video camera in her teaching of undergraduate students. For Jennifer, “witnessing their flow and their intense focus in the field of screen dance really emphasized for me how important it was and how motivating it was to them”. Like flow itself, her reflections and understandings of flow were, thus, dynamic and constantly shifting.

In short, participants articulated the changing and ephemeral nature of flow through their experiences as performers and as witnesses. Despite their different lived experiences, they ascribed similar subjective characteristics to flow: automated, semi-conscious, momentum, beautiful, awe-inspiring, and stunning. Flow was, therefore, a

complex phenomenon that integrated cognitive, biological, and physical processes influenced by the context in which it occurred.

### **Flow is Context-Dependent**

Flow cannot be analyzed independently of the physical and cultural spaces in which it emerged. In this sense, flow was not simply an internal state, but reciprocally connected bodies to the environment or context (Brown, 2006). Participants in this study experienced flow in a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces, each of which were shaped by the cultural expectations of sport, dance, or theatre in those spaces. Marek tied flow to fear in combat sports, where “just the fear, and the stress of that moment, really kind of just chop kicks you into flow [as] a necessity”. The culture of combat sport necessitated entrance into flow to minimize the risk of being hurt or injured. As such, flow in combat sport supported the positive psychology assumption that living a life in flow was linked to positive sport and performance outcomes.

Variability, or lack thereof, in the environment also influenced experiences of flow. In combat sport where two opponents were directly engaged:

There’s a certain objective, and there’s not many variables affecting it; [flow] can be sometimes kind of easier to get into, and you understand flow more often. The more variables you add into it, the less, you know, the more elusive it kind of tends to be. (Marek)

Whereas in team sports, flow depended on interactions between multiple players thus making flow more challenging to ‘find’ and more easily disrupted. Ricardo, a goalkeeper in soccer, articulated this experience of moving into and out of flow:

If the goalkeeper has little work to do on the field, their team is likely playing well and in flow...yet they are constantly witnessing, planning, and adapting to the state of the game as it progresses. At any given moment, they need to react to the play that yields high stakes for [both] the influence of the keeper’s actions and the outcome of the game.

However, in sitting volleyball, a paralympic sport, flow was a matter of greater mental attention and reaction speed. As Kate, a clinical psychologist and coach, explained,

You have less court to move through. It’s easier to score a point because you can block a serve. The game physically goes faster. [It] sometimes finishes in, you know, an hour and a half. It still does as in indoor volleyball, but the game goes quicker and then the contacts are faster.

Because of the low net and the small playing field, sitting volleyball, unlike standing, required constant presence (focus) on both the serve and on the opponent's attack (Morelli et al., 2021). In this example, the physical setting and culture (rules) shaped experiences of flow as intense and brief.

However, as a dancer and researcher Jennifer articulated how the nature of flow was shaped by different spaces and ways of working:

If you were to interview me a year from now, I'm sure my thoughts would change because with screen dance, it constantly changes based on the context of the of the work or the provocation—whether or not I'm doing something purely for production or whether or not I'm doing something for collaboration.

For Jennifer, the role of the camera (audience) influenced her dance practice and experience with flow. As a performer, she was more immersed and focused when working with a camera, where the presence of a camera allowed for “the complete immersion from a flow perspective...I'm more astute.” Integrating a camera (an object), thus, provided a different quality and opportunity for flow different from human-human interactions.

Together, these reflections on the influence of context on flow highlighted how the process of entering into flow varied, yet the experience or feeling of flow was still quite similar. Flow experiences were both enabled and disrupted in varied contexts and through interacting bodies both human and non-human (e.g., camera). Despite the differences in these sport and dance contexts, flow was always seen as something spontaneous and organically occurring.

### **Flow Emerges 'In-the-Moment'**

All participants commented on flow as spontaneous, something organically created in the moment, yet how flow manifested in these contexts was articulated in different ways. In sport, flow was primarily tied to the automation of skills (e.g., releasing a curling rock without thinking, relying on technique; Gabe). It was the absence of thought and letting the body take over in the moment that allowed flow to emerge. As Ricardo stated: “plays with flow are beautiful. They're so exciting because you see like the ball is just dancing around. It's not, nothing's being forced...the ball is just cutting through it like [there's no opponent]”. Skills like passing and receiving a ball or executing a 'set' play required repetition in training to make them automatic, yet these would be produced in unique ways during a game.

In dance and theatre, automation of movement was articulated in different ways. In traditional dance styles, such as ballet, movement was codified or constrained, whereas

“contemporary [dance] is really about having the movement originate from the body and what the body is asked to do and how it responds to music” (Emily). Music effected creativity in movement and was, thus, integral to the experience of flow in dance. Skills were developed through training, but what emerged ‘in the moment’ was contingent on the relationship between the performer’s bodily movement and musical accompaniment. Similarly, in Kathleen’s emblem work, the practice of incorporating physicality in a play, emerged from the actors’ movements, and the interaction between body and the play itself.

The actors create the emblems, even though you don’t say, “do it this way”, or “this is what I want it to look like”, because they’re working from that play, the emblems will begin to take on an outward, physical style that is informed by the actual play. If I have a group of actors making statues, one of the emblems, for like a Greek play, that’s going to look very different than if I have actors making emblems for some crazy, wacky, farce comedy. What I love about it is that the play creates the physical, outward look of the emblems, but the emblems come from within the actors and have this deep embodiment and ownership. (Kathleen)

Instead of music, flow in theatre performances came from the embodiment of the voices, dialogue, time, characters, and setting of a play, which inherently and subtly changed with each performance.

Together, the experiences of these experts as performers and witnesses articulated flow as something beautiful, spontaneous and ever-changing, something that was experienced physically as well as cognitively. Flow was understood as a necessary and ideal state to which performers in dance, theatre, and sport aspired. Most importantly, flow emerged in the moment. It could not be planned or choreographed in advance, yet relied on automation of movement, a lack of self-consciousness or cognition.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout these interviews with various artistic, athletic, academic, and professional backgrounds, I identified moments of divergence and convergence across their experiences. Flow was articulated in terms of aesthetics (e.g., beautiful) and a sense of focus without thought. It was an ideal state to which performers aspired to attain and coaches/teachers struggled to articulate. Flow was not simply a psychological construct, but an intertwining of cognition, physicality, and sensation in a particular setting. To be in flow required a sense of automation, being lost in movement. In team sport, flow

manifested as a sort of behavioural momentum among teammates, whereas in dance and theatre flow was inspired through the integration of body movement and either music or text (play). In short, although some degree of bodily (skill) expertise was required in all contexts, flow could not be choreographed but instead, emerged in the moment.

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